

June 1, 2014
Easter 7

"Painful Trials for Jesus"

1 PETER 4:12-17, 5:6-11

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹ Peter ^{5:6} Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. ⁸ Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. ¹⁰ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

You cannot go through this life without experiencing some pain and suffering. Adam and Eve brought sin into the world, and with that sin comes pain and suffering, and even death. Some people have a large cup of pain and suffering (show large cup) and others make it through life with a much smaller cup of suffering (show smaller cup).

Because you are a Christian you will experience extra pain and suffering for the name of Jesus. For some this will be a large cup (show large cup with cross) and for others this will be a smaller cup (show smaller cup with cross). The Christian high school girls in Nigeria who were kidnapped by Muslim extremist are experiencing a large cup of suffering for Christ (large cup with cross). By comparison our suffering for Jesus is rather small (small cup with cross).

Peter wrote this letter to Christians who were scattered by persecutions that broke out in the Roman Empire. He wants them to know that such suffering for the name of Jesus is not foreign or strange to Christians who want to follow Jesus closely. He wants them to know that no matter how deep the pit is, Jesus is always deeper in his love and protection for us.

Don't be surprised by the painful trials

Peter writes, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at this painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happened to you." The word for painful literally means "fiery." These Christians are about to face severe persecution unleashed on them by the

demented emperor Nero. It was he who took some Christians, wrapped them in pitch soaked rags, put them up on poles and then ignited their bodies. He gleefully proclaimed, "See what beautiful torches my Christians make."

I just read that they expect over 100,000 children to die from malnutrition in the area of South Sudan. We should not think it strange that Muslim warlords from the north find great joy and delight in seeing Christians in the south being driven from their homes.

Don't think it strange if you have to bear a cross for following Jesus closely. Jesus said, "Whoever comes after me must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Hebrews 11 says this about great heroes of faith in the Old Testament, "Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put into prison. They were stoned, they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated- the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground."

The suffering we go through in life for Jesus provides us with an opportunity to bring greater glory and honor to the name of Jesus. "But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you... If you suffer as a Christian do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." It is an honor to bear about in our bodies and our lives the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4. In Acts 5 we hear that the apostles were flogged for speaking about Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. After being beaten for the name of Jesus it says they rejoiced because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Jesus.

I have in my hand a little book called "Persecutor." It is the personal account of a Russian named Sergei who took great joy in persecuting Christian as a successful young communist KGB thug. He relished breaking up prayer meetings and cracking a few skulls with his night stick. One night he broke up a meeting and hit a 16 year old girl along the side of the head with his bare fist, and sent her sprawling across the room. The next week he broke up another meeting and saw the same girl there with a black eye and large bruise on the side of her head where he had hit her. What haunted him every night after that were her eyes that looked at him, not eyes of hatred but of love. It led him to secretly start reading the Bible and he became a believer. Her suffering for Jesus brought glory to Jesus' name and led Sergei to believe.

God does not want people to suffer forever in hell for their sins. That is why he sent Jesus to suffer and die in our place to spare us from the judgment that is to come. In fact the Lord our God will even use pain and suffering of all sorts to keep us close to him and to use us for his glory. Peter says, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us what will the outcome be for those do not obey the gospel of God?"

Last week over 20,000 students and friends from UCSB gathered in Harder Stadium to support each other after the tragic shootings on that campus about ten days ago. Wonderful words were spoken about caring for each other and supporting each other in

time of crisis. It hit me hard. How many of the students in that stadium believe in Jesus? How many people living right around this church believe in Jesus? What pain and suffering will I experience in my life so the Lord can use me to witness more boldly to my Christian faith?

Don't be surprised by the painful sufferings when they come in your life? You are a dear child of God. You are wrapped in the robe of Christ's righteousness. The Lord wants to use you for his glory. He will be there to help you through the hard times to lift you up on eagle's wings and hold you in the palm of his hand. There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper.

Jesus is always there for us

Peter directs our attention to the hand of God that takes care of us. Peter writes for all of us, "Humble yourselves, therefore under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." How many times have you heard yourself or others say, "It is in the hands of the Lord." The Psalmist David said, "My times are in your hands." This is not just some pious wish or expression. Just as a father reaches down to hold the hand of a child, our Heavenly Father reaches down to hold us in his hands. The Father who gave his Son to die for us knows exactly when and how to lift us up and help us through the painful trials. Listen to these comforting words from Isaiah 41:10, "So do not fear for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Notice it says that we can cast all our cares on him. "Cast all your cares on him because he cares for you." It does not say we can cast some of our cares on the Lord. It says we can cast all our cares on him. Oh, how we love that word "all." The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin. Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives. Here it says that we can cast all our cares on him. "What a friend we have in Jesus..." How does it go on from there? "All our sins and griefs to bear."

It is so good to be surrounded by people who love us and care about us. It is even more important to know how much our God cares about us. God cared enough about me to send his Son to die for me, even though I have rebelled against him and lived a life of sin that deserves that he reject me forever. If I were the only person who every sinned since Adam's fall, I am convinced that God in his love and mercy would have sent his Son just for me. God cares about you. He sent his Holy Spirit to create saving faith in your heart. God cares about you. He came to you in the waters of his baptism and put his name on you and washed you clean of your sin. Jesus cares so much for you that he gives you his body and blood with the bread and wine in the Holy Sacrament. God in his mercy fills the Bible with promises that he will care for us and watch over us .

Satan doesn't want us to think about how much our merciful God cares about us. Peter is compelled by love to warn the suffering Christians to watch out for Satan. Satan is no little kitty cat with sharp claws that can scratch you. He is a roaring lion who is always hungry for people to devour. Peter writes, "Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering." If Satan has beaten you up again this week, then you are not alone. You are surrounded

by brothers and sisters who have gone through the same battles. Resist him. Stand firm. Not in the your strength but in the strength the Lord provides you.

Painful trials will come. The Lord knows whether they will be large or small. He knows exactly how to step in and strengthen you and restore you in your faith. I want to end the sermon this morning by having all of us join together in saying verses 10 and 11. "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered for a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen"